

TRENDS IN SEXUAL BEHAVIOURS WITH NON-RELATIONSHIP PARTNERS COINCIDED WITH CHANGES IN COVID-19 NOTIFICATIONS: RESULTS FROM A WEEKLY COHORT STUDY OF GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN IN AUSTRALIA

Authors:

Storer D¹, Prestage G¹, McManus H¹, Holt M², Grulich A¹, Jin F¹, Degenhardt L³, Maher L¹, Saxton P⁴, Philpot S¹, Bavinton B¹, Hammoud MA¹

¹ The Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney

² Centre for Social Research in Health, UNSW Sydney

³ National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney

⁴ Department of Social and Community Health, School of Population Health, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

Background:

Australian jurisdictional COVID-19 physical distancing measures have adapted in response to levels of community transmission. Using data from an online cohort of Australian gay and bisexual men (GBM) we investigate ecological associations between distancing restrictions, COVID-19 notifications, and participants' sexual behaviour.

Methods:

Since May 2020, 746 GBM completed 44 weekly surveys (3 May 2020 – 7 March 2021) including questions about sex with non-relationship partners (fuckbuddies and casual partners). Multiple join point models were used to identify changes in trends of mean number of non-relationship partners and, specifically, sex with casual partners. Using jurisdictional COVID-19 notification data we mapped these against each model.

Results:

Weekly sample sizes ranged from 339 to 524. For mean number of weekly non-relationship partners there was an overall continuous increase over time (0.53-1.18, $p < 0.001$). In NSW, the trend increased to week 17 (24-30 August 2020) and then stabilised. In Victoria, the trend shifted three times: partner numbers increased to week 5 (1-7 June 2020), decreased to week 15 (10-16 August 2020), and increased to week 32 (7-13 December 2020), slightly declining thereafter. The model for sex with casual partners showed an overall increasing linear trend over time (19.9%-20.6%, $p < 0.001$). However, for Victoria, the proportions reporting casual sex increased to week 5 (1-7 June 2020), decreased to week 15 (10-16 August 2020), increased to week 29 (16-22 November 2020), and slightly decline thereafter. Join points in both models broadly coincided with trends in COVID-19 notifications with reductions in partner numbers occurring slightly ahead of lockdowns and partner numbers were slow to rebound after restrictions eased.

Conclusion:

Australian GBM adjusted their sexual activity in response to jurisdictional COVID-19 notification rates. While sex with non-relationship partners has generally increased since the initial responses to the pandemic, this occurred slowly, suggesting ongoing caution in sexual partnering among GBM as restrictions eased.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The Kirby Institute, Centre for Social Research in Health and National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre are funded by the Australian Government Department of Health. This study was funded by the New South Wales Ministry of Health, via the Prevention Research Support Program and NSW Research Program for HIV, STIs and Viral Hepatitis. Funders had no input in the data collection, analysis, interpretation, or presentation of any findings. No pharmaceutical funding was received for this research.